

# MEMO

**DATE:** October 24, 2005

**TO:** Regional Comprehensive Plan Task Force

**FROM:** Jessica Kirchner, Associate Regional Planner (213) 236-1983 kirchner@scag.ca.gov

**SUBJECT:** Regional Comprehensive Plan, Open Space and Habitat Chapter

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## **ACTION:**

Provide input to staff regarding the expanded scope proposed for the Open Space and Habitat chapter of the Regional Comprehensive Plan, and report progress to the Energy and Environment Committee.

## **BACKGROUND:**

The Open Space and Habitat chapter was brought to the task force in March of 2005 and received general input on direction and scope. Since that time, the status of the chapter has been elevated and the scope expanded to include possible collaboration with the California Resources Agency and the development of a consultant effort.

At this time, staff is seeking task force input on the expanded approach of the chapter. The result of the task force discussion should be the instruction to staff on drafting a revised chapter and reporting to the Energy and Environment Committee on the expanded scope.

Information on the expanded approach for the Open Space and Habitat Chapter is attached for your information as are the policy recommendations previously brought before the committee. The section on the scope includes details on the expanded approach as well as actions indicating the proposed direction of the chapter.

Additionally, Dan Silver of the Endangered Habitat League will make a presentation on the benefits of regional mitigation measures and how this relates to the current CEQA Streamlining Process. Mr. Silver's presentation will be followed by Nancy Settle and Elizabeth Chattin of the Ventura County Planning Division who will present the results of a comprehensive survey identifying wildlife movement corridors. As explained below, one goal of the Open Space and Habitat chapter is to build on Ventura County's work and identify wildlife movement corridors at the regional level.

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## REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE PLAN DRAFT OPEN SPACE AND HABITAT KEY POINTS

### I. INTRODUCTION

Parks and open space are fundamental to the livability of cities and their neighborhoods. As the population of Southern California continues to grow, development will consume a large portion of land in the region. The indiscriminate conversion of lands to urban development may lead to the loss of many open space resources, including the loss of agricultural lands. With the destruction of some of the critical ecosystems and sensitive habitats in the region, federal and state governments will likely impose more stringent resource protection and conservation requirements through endangered species acts. A comprehensive, cohesive regional approach is needed to resolve the constant conflict between development and open space and habitat needs.

### II. SCOPE

The four major types of open space to be considered in the chapter are: outdoor recreation (beaches, rivers, national forest, etc), public health and safety (fault zones, flood zones, unstable soil, etc) resource production (crops, fisheries, agricultural land) and resource protection (sites set aside for protection and management of natural habitats and species).

Within the above context, the chapter will include the following objectives:

#### Develop a vision for open space preservation for Southern California

The current open space conservation/preservation process is highly fragmented. Some areas within the region have developed area wide plans, such as the Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan and Orange County's Green Visions Plan. A regional level analysis of these plans could explore ways to integrate overlapping plans, build on existing plans and encourage the development of new plans for those areas not currently included, but identified as key corridors or prime open space.

**Action:** The end result would be a regional level analysis with a consistent look and uniform procedures and mitigation. This would provide a template that could be easily implemented at the local level.

#### Identify the characteristics of land that should not be developed based on a "natural systems" approach

Conventional approaches to habitat conservation have relied on the designation of reserves to support various endangered and threatened plant and animal species, in an effort to assure their long-term survival and recovery. A natural systems approach is more holistic and attempts to explore the integration of humans into the natural environment and vice versa.

**Action:** The Open Space and Habitat chapter will include information on new technologies designed to better integrate humans as components of ecosystems.

#### Identify suggested amount and type of parkland within urban settings

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The national Recreation and Parks Association recommends a range of 6.25-10.5 acres of parkland per 1,000 population.<sup>1</sup> The actual range throughout the region is expected to vary greatly. Those areas with newer development tend to be “park rich” while those areas with older development tend to be “park poor.” This is in part due to recognition on the part of cities to include more open space (through exactions and other means) in new development.

**Action:** The Open Space and Habitat chapter will attempt to develop measures of parkland and access appropriate for Southern California and delineate action steps to increase access to parks and open space for all Southern California residents.

## Identify measures to mitigate habitat impacts of transportation projects

Every day, one million vertebrates are killed on America’s roadways, according to the Humane Society of the United States and the Urban Wildlife Research Center<sup>2</sup>, making roadkill the greatest direct human caused source of wildlife mortality in the country. Additionally, road avoidance by species has an ecological impact by impeding animal movement and restricting habitat connectivity. Roads fragment habitats and cause isolation, which can lead to problems such as inbreeding, resource depletion, reduction of biodiversity and even extinction of wild populations.

Efforts to mitigate negative wildlife-roadway interactions are increasingly creative and effective. Though efforts to utilize this type of mitigation have been researched and discussed since the mid 1970s much remains to be done to incorporate the current knowledge into planning policy.

**Action:** The Open Space and Habitat chapter will examine wildlife crossings at the regional level, building on the work done in Ventura County, and apply the knowledge gained at a regional scale. This analysis will include identification of important and restricted wildlife corridors to preserve habitat connectivity.

## Identify financial mechanisms to accrue funding for open space protection

The identification of a funding mechanism is a key component of the Open Space and Habitat chapter. SCAG recognizes the importance of a feasible plan that can be implemented at the local level.

**Action:** A consultant is expected to be retained for tasks including (but not limited to) securing open space resources, forming a pool of funding for mitigation of impacts of new development, and providing discretionary incentive funding to cities and counties for adopting policies supportive of a regional growth strategy developing infrastructure

## Analyze existing state plans for open space, habitat, and parks. Recommend for future planning efforts based on consistency with the region’s desired outcomes

Several plan types exist that identify how a particular species, habitat or natural community might be conserved or recovered from the threat of extinction. Many of these are mandated by state or federal agencies to avoid the extinction of species that have been identified as threatened or endangered under the federal or state endangered species acts. Of these regulatory plans, the most common are species recovery plans, habitat conservation plans and natural community conservation plans.

<sup>1</sup> National Recreation and Parks Association, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> R. Noss. *The Ecological Effects of Roads, or The Road to Destruction*. 1996, Unpublished white paper.

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Species recovery plans are written by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to guide actions that will lead to the recovery of federally threatened or endangered species. These plans are proactive and are written independently of development proposals. In contrast, a Habitat Conservation Plan identifies conservation actions that will be taken to offset harm to a species (or group of species) elsewhere.

In California, Natural Community Conservation Plans (NCCPs) are the result of a joint process to provide for the conservation of natural communities through a process that is administered by the California Department of Fish and Game with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The NCCP program is currently authorized for a limited geographic area that targets a suite of species associated with coastal sage scrub. These larger scale plans also provide for some listed species to be killed in exchange for conservation of habitat elsewhere.

Other governmental plans may respond to conservation needs. For example, the County of Los Angeles identifies a series of “Significant Ecological Areas” within the county. Development within these areas requires a higher level of environmental review.

Other conservation plans are not a function of regulation, but rather are created by stakeholders, agencies and individuals. These range from complex, scientific studies being integrated into a plan, to charrettes led by community stakeholders.

**Action:** The California Resources Agency has participated in talks with SCAG staff and has agreed, in concept, to collaborate on the chapter. Evaluation at the regional level will enable communities to see what has been done elsewhere. In addition, this process will be proactive rather than reactive (relying on the endangered species acts) and will facilitate broad community participation. This will help develop an iterative process whereby regional priorities influence other plans and vice versa.

Develop open space and habitat planning tools and best practices to be implemented at the local level  
Several recent reports have detailed the deficiency of park space within urban areas in the SCAG region.<sup>3, 4</sup> Although a regional open space vision will deliver on many of the benefits described above, it is widely understood that the actual benefits of parks and open space are generally felt at the local level.

**Action:** Recognizing the benefits of parks are experienced at the local level, the open space and habitat chapter will include a “toolkit” for local governments who want to increase park space within their jurisdictions.

Possible outcomes from the open space and habitat chapter include:

- Open space protection guide
- Species viability goals
- Park accessibility goals
- Compliance with existing legal requirements

<sup>3</sup> Parks and Park Funding in Los Angeles: An Equity Mapping Analysis, USC Sustainable Cities

<sup>4</sup> No Place to Play: A Comparative Analysis of Park Access in Seven Major Cities, The Trust for Public Land.

## Regional Comprehensive Plan, Open Space and Habitat Policies

1	<b>Enhance Recreation and Tourism Opportunities:</b> Provide adequate land resources to meet the outdoor recreation needs of the present and future residents in the region and to promote tourism in the region. [1996 RCPG]
2	<b>Maintain Economic Productivity of Regional Lands:</b> Maintain adequate viable resource production lands, particularly lands devoted to commercial agriculture and mining operations. [1996 RCPG]
3	<b>Utilize Growth Forecasts In Natural Areas Planning:</b> The population, housing, and jobs forecasts, which are adopted by SCAG's Regional Council and that reflect local plans and policies, shall be used by SCAG in all phases of implementation and review. [1996 RCPG]
4	<b>Use Proactive Participatory Systems Approach for Natural Areas and Recreation Planning:</b> Future impacts to natural areas and recreation lands shall be avoided through cooperation, information sharing, and program development during the update of the Natural Areas and Conservation chapter of SCAG's Regional Comprehensive Plan and Guide and through SCAG's Energy and Environment Committee. [2004 RTP-EIR]
5	<b>Encourage Adaptive Reuse for Growth:</b> Encourage patterns of urban development and land use, which reduce costs on infrastructure construction and make better use of existing facilities. [1996 RCPG]
6	<b>Use Proactive Participatory Systems Approach for Ecological Conservation Planning:</b> Minimize future impacts to biological resources through cooperation, information sharing, and program development during the update of the Habitat and Natural Areas chapter of SCAG's Regional Comprehensive Plan, through SCAG's Energy and Environment Committee and in consultation with resource agencies. [2004 RTP-EIR]
7	<b>Encourage Planning for Environmentally Sensitive Lands:</b> Encourage planned development in locations least likely to cause environmental impact. [1996 RCPG]
8	<b>Use Proactive Participatory Systems Approach for Cultural Resource Planning:</b> Minimize future impacts to cultural resources through cooperation, information sharing, and program development of SCAG's Regional Comprehensive Plan and Guide, through SCAG's Energy and Environment Committee and in consultation with other resource agencies (such as the Office of Historic Preservation), during this update process. [2004 RTP-EIR]
9	<b>Preserve Forests and Designated Natural Areas:</b> National Forests shall remain permanently preserved and used as natural areas. SCAG shall support policies and actions that preserve natural areas areas identified in local, state, and federal plans. [1996 RCPG]
10	<b>Promote Low-impact Development Techniques:</b> Promote water-efficient land use development. [2004 RTP-EIR]
11	<b>Protect Ecologically Productive Lands:</b> Support the protection of vital resources such as wetlands, groundwater recharge areas, woodlands, production lands, and land containing unique and endangered plants and animals. [1996 RCPG]
12	<b>Promote Fire-wise Land Management:</b> Encourage the use of fire-resistant vegetation and the elimination of brush and chaparral in the immediate vicinity of development in areas with high fire threat. [2004 RTP-EIR]
13	<b>Preserve Cultural and Archeological Lands:</b> Encourage the implementation of measures aimed at the preservation and protection of recorded and unrecorded cultural resources and archaeological sites.[1996 RCPG]

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14	<b>Promote Fire Management Planning:</b> Help reduce fire threats in the region as part of the Growth Visioning process and as policies in the update of SCAG's Regional Comprehensive Plan and Guide. [2004 RTP-EIR]
15	<b>Avoid Hazardous Lands:</b> Discourage development, or encourage the use of special design requirements, in areas with steep slopes, high fire, flood, and seismic hazards. [1996 RCPG]
16	<b>Coordinate Recreational Planning Within and Across Region:</b> Encourage member jurisdictions to work as partners to address regional outdoor recreation needs and to acquire the necessary funding for the implementation of their plans and programs. [2004 RTP-EIR]
17	<b>Support Sustainability Planning for Communities:</b> Support local jurisdictions and other service providers in their efforts to develop sustainable communities and provide, equally to all members of society, accessible and effective services such as: public education, housing, health care, social services, recreational facilities, law enforcement, and fire protection. [1996 RCPG]
18	<b>Encourage Conservation of Agricultural Lands:</b> Encourage implementation agencies to obtain assistance from the American Farmland Trust in developing and implementing farmland conservation measures. [2004 RTP-EIR]
19	<b>Improve Access to Natural Areas:</b> Increase the accessibility to natural areas lands for outdoor recreation. [1996 RCPG]
20	<b>Encourage Preservation of Agricultural Lands:</b> Encourage implementation agencies to avoid the premature conversion of farmlands by promoting infill development and the continuation of agricultural uses until urban development is imminent; if development of agricultural lands is necessary, growth should be directed to those lands on which the continued viability of agricultural production has been compromised by surrounding urban development or the loss of local markets. [2004 RTP-EIR]
21	<b>Enhance Sustainable Recreation Resource Management:</b> Promote self-sustaining regional recreation resources and facilities. [1996 RCPG]
22	<b>Encourage Protection of Agricultural Lands:</b> Encourage implementation agencies to establish transfer of development rights (TDR) programs to direct growth to less agriculturally valuable lands (while considering the potential effects at the sites receiving the transfer) and ensure the continued protection of the most agriculturally valuable land within each county through the purchase of the development rights for these lands. [2004 RTP-EIR]
23	<b>Maintain Buffer Zones:</b> Maintain natural areas for adequate protection of lives and properties against natural and man-made hazards. [1996 RCPG]
24	<b>Promote Multiple-Use Approach To Development:</b> Encourage that multiple use of spaces be allowed as feasible and practical, and encourage redevelopment activities to focus some investment on recreation uses so as to provide more opportunities for access to natural areas close to the urban core. [2004 RTP-EIR]
25	<b>Avoid Hazardous Areas:</b> Minimize potentially hazardous developments in hillsides, canyons, areas susceptible to flooding, earthquakes, wildfire and other known hazards, and areas with limited access for emergency equipment. [1996 RCPG]
26	<b>Support Cooperative Planning Across Levels of Organization (Systems Approach):</b> Encourage member jurisdictions that have trails and trail segments determined to be regionally significant to work together to support regional trail networks. SCAG shall encourage joint use of utility, transportation and other rights-of-way, greenbelts, and biodiversity areas. [2004 RTP-EIR]
27	<b>Avoid Areas that Risk Health and Safety:</b> Minimize public expenditure for infrastructure and facilities to support urban type land uses in areas where public health and safety could not be guaranteed. [1996 RCPG]

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28	<b>Support Livability and Integrate Natural and Human Uses of the Land:</b> Foster livability in all communities. [Growth Vision]
29	<b>Utilize Effective Ecosystem Management Planning:</b> Develop well-managed viable ecosystems or known habitats of rare, threatened and endangered species, including wetlands. [1996 RCPG]
30	<b>Preserve Environmentally Sensitive Areas:</b> Preserve rural, agricultural, recreational, and environmentally sensitive areas. [Growth Vision]
31	<b>Use An Ecosystem Approach To Regional Planning:</b> Encourage "watershed management" programs and strategies, recognizing the primary role of local governments in such efforts. [1996 RCPG]
32	<b>Protect Environmentally Sensitive Areas:</b> Protect sensitive environmental features such as steep slopes, wetlands, and stream corridors from development. [Growth Vision]
33	<b>Support Flow of Data and Information for Systems Approach to Planning:</b> Coordinate watershed management planning at the subregional level by (1) providing consistent regional data; (2) serving as a liaison between affected local, state, and federal watershed management agencies; and (3) ensuring that watershed planning is consistent with other planning objectives (e. g., transportation, air quality, water supply). [1996 RCPG]
34	<b>Support Sustainability Planning and Design:</b> Utilize "green" development techniques. [Growth Vision]
35	<b>Support Wetland Conservation:</b> Support regional efforts to identify and cooperatively plan for wetlands to facilitate both sustaining the amount and quality of wetlands in the region and expediting the process for obtaining wetlands permits. [1996 RCPG]
36	<b>Promote Smart Growth:</b> Promote infill development and redevelopment to revitalize existing communities. [Growth Vision]
37	<b>Encourage Integrative Planning:</b> Encourage mitigation measures that reduce noise in certain locations, measures aimed at preservation of biological and ecological resources, measures that would reduce exposure to seismic hazards, minimize earthquake damage, and to develop emergency response and recovery plans: [1996 RCPG]
38	<b>Ensure adequate access to Natural Areas:</b> [Growth Vision]